

Working with Animals

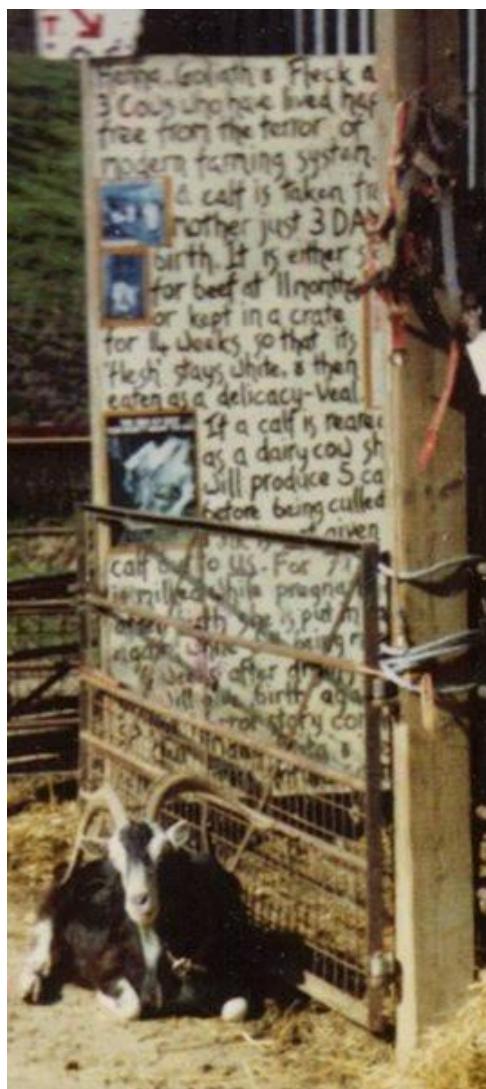


Illustration: Billy



Illustration: My Glastonbury Festival 1990 pass working on the lost dogs area.

In 1988 I had completed a course at the Central School of Speech and Drama (which has since then had the word “Royal” attached to its name) in Swiss Cottage, London and I wanted to get back to Somerset.

I’d moved up to London from Glastonbury the year before to study on the “Drama and Movement in Therapy” course run by the Sesame group. I didn’t have much money and so I had to find a cheap way of getting back to Glastonbury. I found an advert for volunteers needed at an animal sanctuary in West Henley near Langport and that’s pretty close to Glastonbury and I had always wanted to do some work with animals so it looked like a perfect solution.

I phoned through to the Heaven’s Gate Animal Sanctuary and offered to be one of their volunteers. They agreed to give me some work to do even though I didn’t have any previous experience with animals.

I travelled down to Street, Somerset by National Express coach. Street is the next town along from Glastonbury. I phoned through to Heaven’s Gate from there and someone came in a car to collect me and drive me the last few miles to the sanctuary.

Heaven’s Gate was an old farm which had been converted into an animal sanctuary and was run by Annabel Walters who lived in a traditional Romani style caravan and was followed everywhere by several dogs.

We got off to a difficult start. Annabel left her little terrier dog in the room with me while she went to another room for a few minutes. In her absence I reached my hand down to the little dog to stroke his head and he immediately bit my hand. Quite a deep bite.

It was the first time I had ever been bitten by any animal larger than a mosquito. Then Annabel came back into the room and apologised for not warning me that the dog was a nervous, untrusting creature who would often bite. The next twenty minutes or so were focussed on getting my hand disinfected and bandaged.

Then we settled the details of how long I was able to work there (indefinitely or until I found paid employment in Somerset) and whereabouts I would live and work.

Some volunteers lived in rooms in the farmhouse and some lived in caravans. I was allocated a caravan in the farmyard and would be set to work the next day after a tour of the various sections.

Every working day at Heaven’s gate was an early start and we tended to work six days out of every seven. There was no pay for most of us. Only the manager got a small salary but the rest of us had a subsistence level of food and accommodation. We had to go into Street once a fortnight to sign on as jobseekers, look at vacancies, attend interviews, restart courses etc. The rest of the time we were getting up before eight in morning, getting a quick breakfast and then going up the yard to begin work with the animals.

The sanctuary was divided into sections and these were designated by the titles:

1. Dogs
2. Cats and Rabbits
3. Horses, Ducks and Chickens
4. Cows, Goats and Sheep
5. The Office
6. The Kitchen

Sometimes we would temporarily be looking after an animal which did not fit into one of these sections. For instance at one stage there was a ferret and for a while there was a pig. The Dogs section comprised a main kennel block, some isolation kennels and also some dogs which were kept in volunteer's rooms. We had to think in terms of the emotional stability of the animals and preparing them to be re-homed to suitable new owners. Some dogs were so unhappy because of the way they had been treated by previous owners that they would howl and howl all night long and disturb all of the other animals. These dogs we tried to comfort by letting them stay in our rooms and caravans and giving them hugs and love. If they were so needy, lonely or sad that they howled again every time that we tried to get some sleep we would try putting them into an isolation kennel up at the top of a field far enough away that their howls were only distantly heard. Obviously this was not a solution but we had to get some sleep in order to be able to continue working the next day. The staff in the office were continually having to cope with phone calls from nasty people who tried to emotionally blackmail us with threats of "If you don't take this dog I'm gonna shoot it dead!". We coordinated with the R.S.P.C.A. and other sanctuaries, groups and individuals to find the best solutions for many traumatic situations. Traumatic for us as well as for the animals. There were always more unwanted animals than there were homes to put them in. We wished that people would stop deliberately breeding animals for sale.

The Cats and Rabbits section comprised a row of constructed cat and rabbit environments and hutches with a series of runs at the back. The rabbits needed some time each day running around and getting fresh air before being returned to the enclosed areas. The person on the Cats and Rabbits section would change their hay each day, removing droppings. Airing and cleaning where necessary to avoid the accumulation of higher levels of ammonia from piss.

The Animals' Kitchen area was where dog food, cat food, rabbit food etcetera was prepared. The sanctuary received frequent donations of animal food from farms, factories, supermarkets and individuals. Annabel or whoever was doing the Manager job at any given time would drive to various places around the county collecting donations of carrots and other vegetables and fruits and also tins of dog and cat food and whatever else that people could spare.

Vets were always consulted about the health and needs of each animal and supplements such as vitamins and minerals were added to food bowls according to expert advice.

There were several horses and a great many ducks and chickens. We were diligent about regularly checking fences and chicken sheds for any wear and tear or damage because we had an awareness of the activities of foxes in the area. Foxes are not a problem and they

need to live just as any other creature does but a careful inspection of all possible ways that the fox may approach the area where ducks and chickens are kept can keep the birds safe at night and permit the fox to go about its foraging elsewhere. Foxes don't need chickens or ducks. The fox family can survive well enough on worms and insects etc.

One of the daily tasks for the person working on the Horses, Ducks and Chickens area was to go around just before dusk to count the birds and make sure that the correct number had found their way into the chicken sheds and duck enclosures before sunset. They were then locked in safely for the night. Sometimes two or three hens were missing and these were usually found sitting in the hay barn and so could be easily transferred to the chicken sheds.

The horses were allowed plenty of exercise and generally grazed peacefully. The vet would come regularly to examine them and, on one occasion, a horse was diagnosed as suffering from laminitis, an irreversible condition which causes the horse increasing pain and difficulty in walking. There is no cure and we sadly had to assist the vet in humanely terminating the horse's life. We were keeping the animal calm when the vet used a special bolt gun to cause death as quickly as possible. The bolt is shot through the horse's brain at point blank range and then the vet quickly pushes the bolt back and forward several times through the animal's head to destroy any remaining brain cells. We wanted to be absolutely certain that the brain activity was ended in the quickest possible time in case of the animal still experiencing any suffering. I witnessed the speed and precision of the vet at work and I am sure that the horse felt nothing.

We had previously dug a large grave and we then had the task of burial.

During my time at Heaven's Gate I mostly worked in the Cows, Goats and Sheep section. This involved an enormous amount of mucking out. I would get up before eight o'clock six mornings every week and go up the yard to the goat shed, the cow shed and grazing fields. The animals needed to be allowed out to run around a bit while I shovelled goat shit and cow shit into a wheelbarrow and dumped it onto the muck heap which was around the back behind the cow shed.

One February we had a ewe who was pregnant but couldn't give birth because of a problem with her vulva. I took instructions over the telephone from a vet who couldn't get to where we were in time. Following the vet's instructions I had to massage the ewe's vulva until it dilated sufficiently for the lambs to emerge. The procedure was successful and I was proud to announce the birth of two baby lambs. I had become a midwife to a sheep!

There were 27 goats (give or take new arrivals and departures now and again), a similar number of sheep grazing in the fields and there were two cows and one bull.

The bull's name was Golly (short for "Goliath") and he was a very gentle old creature. The cows were named Henna and Fleck. I led them out into one of the fields each day to graze and I put salt licks up for them. In wintertime my first job of the morning was usually to take a great big stick and break the thick ice on the cow troughs so that the cows would have some water to drink during the day. When the vet wanted to look at or trim the cow's hooves I had

to bring the cows (and the bull) in from the field and rig up a rope over a roof beam to hold the hoof up long enough for the vet to do his work. Then the next hoof, then the next, etc. When it came time to trim the hooves of the goats and sheep I was able to do that myself. The usual method was to trick the goat or sheep into being pushed over onto some soft ground and then to stand astride the animal, trimming the hooves with a special knife designed for the purpose. I needed to be very gentle with the sheep especially because they have weak hearts and needed to be calmed down. A panic could potentially kill an old sheep. Bear in mind that the sheep we had at the animal sanctuary were mostly older than sheep on farms because we were allowing them to live their natural lifespan. When a farmer says an animal is "old" he means that he's planning to murder the captive creature and eat the corpse. Our sheep were only old as determined by nature.

Trimming the hooves of the goats was slightly tricky because I needed to be wary of their aggressive tendencies. The leader of the goat herd was an old billy goat named, unimaginatively, "Billy". He had very long curly horns and knew how to use them. So I had to take great care to approach him head on and confidently take hold of his horns, holding the horns securely and then turning him over while using my leg to sweep his feet from under him and he would roll smoothly over onto his back and then lay there peacefully sighing now and then as he endured the humiliation of defeat. The goats recognised Billy as their herd leader but Billy ceded his authority to me by right of conquest.

These human concepts of chivalry are derived directly from animal behaviour and we have inherited these instincts from our evolutionary ancestors just as the goats have inherited theirs. Working with animals requires that we get in touch with our own animal heritage stretching all the way back to when humans were apes. However it is important that we don't allow our inherited animal nature to dominate our behaviour. We need the human part of our brains and nervous systems to be in control at all times. Only a human can conceive of the idea of an animal sanctuary. Only a human can set out to deliberately show compassion to other species. We might be potentially the most dangerous and horrible creature on the planet but we are also potentially the most compassionate. This is what our complex brain gives to us. The ability to be far better or far worse than any other animal.

So I temporarily became the leader of the goat herd whenever I needed to. The goats were able to acknowledge that I fed them, mucked them out, sprayed their bums with tetracycline and gentian violet, trimmed their hooves, let them out into field and brought them back into the goat shed at the end of the day.

Some work on an animal sanctuary is seasonal. The sanctuary hired someone each year to shear the sheep as the summer approached. Sheep wool is rich in a substance called lanolin which partially resists rain water. However the rain will still saturate the sheep's wool if they are out in the rain for very long periods. Consequently sheep are often carrying a great deal of weight on their backs until the sun arrives to dry them out again. When the sheep were sheared each year they gained a lot of energy running around in the field without all that weight on their backs. Most people who worked at Heaven's Gate were vegan and so we didn't tend to wear woollen garments (unless in some cases bought in a charity shop) but because the wool sheared from our sheep wasn't from the cruel industry which exploits sheep for meat and wool it had no ethical problems attached and could be knitted.

We also had a legal requirement to put the sheep through a government authorised sheep dip chemical. One year one of the sheep slipped as it was going through the ship dip and I had to jump in and grab that sheep and turn her back right side up again before she drowned. In the process I got some of the sheep dip chemical in my mouth. I wondered for a long time whether there would be health consequences from that but I'm now 70 years old as I write this in 2024 and my health over the years has mostly been more or less okay. Animals are not stupid. Well, it all depends on the species of course. Watch an insect flying at a glass window pane over and over again. Flies and wasps are stupid. But when we consider the questions of animal rights and animal welfare we have to do it on a species by species basis.

I'm not a religious person, although I used to be religious when I was younger. When I was religious I thought a lot about the concept of a "soul", a "spirit", a "buddha-nature" and so on. Eventually, when I'd gotten religion out of my system, I decided that the key thing is individual personality.

The simplest organisms have no individual personality. More advanced creatures display very little individual personality. When you get up the evolutionary tree as far as dogs, cats, horses, elephants, monkeys, whales you can see definite evidence of the animal behaving in individualistic ways and displaying unique personality characteristics. That's the level where it is true to say "animals are not stupid". You turn your back on a ram and he begins to adopt the stance for butting you from behind. Turn around and face him and he thinks better of it and backs down. He's able to calculate when his best chances are.

We had one sheep called Lucy. She had a twisted and deformed jaw but she was still able to graze. Lucy had been brought up as a family pet. When anyone entered the field where the sheep were grazing the herd of sheep would move nervously further away, perceiving the approaching human as a possible threat. Lucy, by contrast, would run towards the human to say hello and be petted. Y'see? Nurture not nature.

When we look at the level of evolution which has produced the human brain and the brain-to-eye-to-hand coordination possible in a human we see a profound level of individuality. We have progressed so far in the direction of the advancement of personality that we now have a society built not upon purely physical needs and processes but upon ideas!

Ideas are the new evolution. We are now creatures of personality and mind. We cannot go back to basic animal forms of behaviour. We should not go back to basic animal forms of behaviour. We are more than that now. This is not arrogance. This is fact.

What we were once told by religions regarding the concept of a soul we can now apply more accurately to the concept of the individual personality. We should not be attempting to live in some style described as "natural".

"Natural" is an almost completely meaningless term for humans. Volcanoes are natural. Earthquakes are natural. Deadly Nightshade is natural. Venomous insects are natural. Bubonic plague is natural. The airless vacuum of space is natural. Nature is entirely composed of stuff randomly happening. All of the universe is stuff randomly happening. Transcendentalist beliefs about finding God in nature are mere fantasies. All of

nature is the interplay of chaos and structure. If you want to make the interplay between chaos and structure into a “God” then good luck to you but human evolution is moving on and, if we don’t destroy ourselves or get destroyed by nature, we will continue to create our human culture based on individualism. Any attempt to turn us into a communistic hivemind is going to fail because the success of that idea would be a reversal of everything human turned backwards into some ghastly Nietzschean pseudo-amorality and that in turn is an abdication of our responsibilities as a creature able to tell the difference between right and wrong.

So we make use of our greater capacity for thought and planning and organisation. We make use of the ability to organise our compassion into systems which can make life on Earth better for humans and animals. Other people around the world are using these same abilities to make life horrible for themselves and for others. Each individual person needs to think seriously about what sort of world we want to live in.

Life on the animal sanctuary was interesting and fun. We took our meals either in the caravans or in the communal living room of the farm house. There was television and that was how I came to realise that television had improved over the years of the 1980s. I had been avoiding any television since the 1970s because I considered almost everything on “the idiot box” to be complete and utter rubbish. However, when I was eating my meals in the farmhouse, watching TV with everybody else, I realised that there was a fourth channel which had unusual things like “Dance on Four” and “Animation on Four” and that there were several new programmes which I really wanted to see each week (Red Dwarf, Star Trek:TNG and Twin Peaks).

When I started work at Heaven’s Gate I was a vegetarian but my vegetarianism had had a bumpy ride. Over the years between 1970 (when I first became a vegetarian) to 1974 (when I was brainwashed by a pseudo-religious cult which convinced me to resume meat eating) to 1978 when I returned to vegetarianism and to 1982 when I experimented with veganism for six months to 1987 when extreme stress after Steve killing his girlfriend Tabby in 7a the High Street, Glastonbury and subsequent problems while studying Drama and Movement Therapy had broken my vegetarianism again I had begun to feel that my attempts at vegetarianism were like a series of shipwrecks upon the rocks of life. After a few weeks at Heaven’s gate I had become firmly vegan and this has lasted through the past 36 years as I write this in 2024.

One day a bloke called Bob came to work at Heaven’s Gate. He claimed to be a Nichiren Daishonin Buddhist. He and I were both working in the office answering the phones. He was in the office by choice. He was the type of person who turns up at various charities and offers “to look after the financial side of things”. Anytime that anyone is running any sort of charity you can pretty much predict that somebody will turn up offering to do all the accounting and financial bit of things. They are like vultures. I was working in the office temporarily because I had a broken right arm in a sling as a result of falling out of a tree in Kent. What I was doing in tree in Kent is a whole other story. Anyway, I was talking to Bob and I expressed the opinion that Nichiren Daishoninism wasn’t Buddhist because Buddha taught non-attachment to material things and non-attachment to desires while Nichiren Daishoninism has people chanting for money and chanting for success in business and all

that sort of thing. Bob flew into a rage about this and shouted at me “Just don’t say Nichiren Daishoninism isn’t Buddhist! That’s All!” and stormed out of the room.

As I wasn’t out in the yard doing my usual work Bob was asked to bring the cows in from the field in my stead. I gave him full instructions on how to do it. I explained that we lead the cows in from the field using a bucket of carrots, parsnips and apples. Golly the bull and the two cows would follow the parsnip until they start to get the idea that the parsnip is never going to be given and then they start to turn away. When this happens they are each given a parsnip (or an apple or a carrot) and then they follow the next one that is offered. Repeating the process as many times as necessary until they are back in the cowshed with some hay. Bob went off to bring the cows in. I stayed in the office. After a little while there was a phone call for Bob so I went out with the mobile phone (they did exist in those days but they looked like bricks) to find him.

I found Bob driving the cows in by hitting them on the bum with a stick (the way farmers would do it). I had a big argument with him about it but the bastard was all ready to just ignore me and carry on hitting the cows so I kicked him.

I had to kick him. There was nothing else I could do. I had tried speaking rationally with words and he had ignored me. I had a broken right arm so I couldn’t punch him. The only thing left to do was kick him. The sudden movement hurt my arm immensely. It was a genuine example of “this hurts me more than it hurts you”. Still, it had to be done.

I got told off by the manager for that and advised never to do anything like that ever again. Still, no worries a?

I worked at Heaven’s Gate from Autumn 1988 through to 1989 and 1990 in an unpaid capacity and then in a paid capacity at Heaven’s Gate and at a Horse and Pony Sanctuary which Annabelle had established near Bridgwater. In between these I returned to live in Glastonbury in a house on Windmill Hill for a while and studied for my BTEC in Caring in a work placement back at Children’s World again, also doing an O Level in Art and Design, an A Level in Theatre Studies and volunteering on Saturdays at Bridgwater Arts Centre. Then I moved to Taunton and did an Access Course in Art and Design and a part time job as a cleaner in the Somerset County Council offices in the evenings. By mid-1992 I had completed these studies and successfully applied for a place at the University of Plymouth to do a Fine Art degree.

Writing that paragraph I was thinking “Wow, that seems like A LOT!” and I know that it was a lot. I remember how I used to be in those days. I had a grim determination to get the next thing done and the next thing done and the next thing done. Hitting all the necessary targets to move on and move on and move on. That’s how I had become because of all the previous times when I had to do so many bits of various types of work and study. Forcing myself to get up on cold winter mornings and go to do what was needed for the animals. Forcing myself to get on my bicycle and go from Glastonbury to Street to study art and to study theatre at Strode College. Always forcing myself to do the next necessary thing and the next and next. I had become almost machinelike in the process of getting things done. There were heartbreaks and difficulties.

At the beginning of the 1990s a woman called Angela came to take over as the new manager of the Heaven's Gate Sanctuary. She was horrible and everybody hated her. Volunteers began leaving because they didn't want to work under the direction of Angela. Most people who worked at Heaven's Gate were vegan, some were vegetarian. Angela was neither. Angela was one of the type of people who like to proudly declare that they can't read or write but they can "drive a tractor". Angela hated the goats and thought they were "evil". We had one pig on the site and his name was "Squidger". Angela hated that pig and was determined that she would "have that pig one of these days".

Angela began introducing policies which everyone else hated. Putting numbers in sheep's ears instead of giving them names. Treating the dogs very roughly.

Angela decided she would like to do dog walking classes and she advertised these locally. After a couple of weeks the classes had to stop because the dog owners were all outraged at how roughly Angela had treated their dogs. Angela tried to play it down as though nothing bad had happened. When that didn't work she began to blame other people at the sanctuary even though none of us had been present when the incident occurred. From then onwards Angela began to act more and more openly like a deliberate infiltrator who was on an agenda of disruption.

Eventually we got the announcement that Heaven's Gate was to be taken over by the Animal Welfare Trust and we could apply to them for jobs if we wished. However, hard on the heels of this announcement came the news that Angela had already been taken on by A.W.T.

Like everyone else the moment I heard that A.W.T. had decided to employ Angela I immediately decided against applying to them.

And that was the end of that episode in my life. The next thing I would be able to do for animal welfare was in 1992 when I began to go out sabbing with the East Devon Anti-Bloodsports group from Exeter.

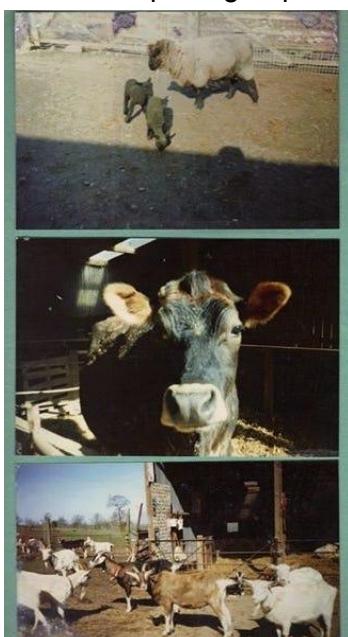


Illustration: Cows, Goats and Sheep at Heaven's Gate.